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ABSTRACT

Based on a year's work with 16 second grade students, this two-part paper reports the successful use of the Marathon Writing (continuous writing for short periods on a regular basis) strategy in encouraging beginning writers to write independently. The first part of the paper explains the technique of marathon writing, and notes that even though children may read at advanced grade levels, they generally do not write at that same advanced level. The section goes on to note that the use of marathon writing was, in this case, supplemental to the students' regular second grade program, involving three half-hour sessions a week in which children wrote nonstop in special booklets for a five minute period at the beginning of each session. The second part of the paper is a letter to the students' parents, and is a result of the author's own marathon writing. The letter explains the rules for marathon writing, the students' fascination with the author's shorthand, and a writing activity in which the children became involved. (Five references are included.) (JC)

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MARATHON WRITING--A LETTER TO PARENTS

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Language arts and reading journals have published many articles on writing through the years. In the last five years, more emphasis than ever has been placed on writing, and the journals are filled with excellent recommendations on incorporating more writing into the school curriculum. Frequently relying on the work of Donald Graves (1983), teachers and teacher trainers undertook the study of children's writing and then applied their understanding in classrooms with students of all grade levels (Allen, 1986). Even children thought previously not ready for writing instruction began in the kindergarten year, sometimes even on the first day (Martinez and Teale, 1987).

Because of this emphasis in the literature and my own interest in gaining more firsthand experience in teaching writing, I taught 16 second graders for one-half hour each Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday as one part of the elementary school teaching done during my one-year sabbatical leave from the university. If special education had a label for these children, they would probably be divided into two categories called Especially Smart and Profoundly Smart.

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Some of them were in the gifted program, some were tested for the gifted program but didn't quite make the cut-off, and the remainder of the children were doing very well in reading and were in the same basal reader groups in their classrooms. They came from three classes, and all were in the 2' basal since the consultant for the basal program recommended that first and second graders not receive basal instruction above grade level. One of the boys in this group was found to be very close to independent level in fourth grade material on the Ekwall Reading Inventory at the beginning of second grade. Another was comfortable at fourth grade on the Ekwall shortly after he started first grade.

Typically, children who read far above grade level do not write at that same advanced level. My program, strictly supplemental to their regular second grade program, incorporated the Individualized Approach to Reading which uses self-selection of library books along with a variety of teacher initiated writing activities (Barbe and Abbott, 1975). One of the writing activities done every day was Marathon Writing based on an article by Timothy Shanahan (1977). The special strategies used appear later in this article in the form of a letter to the children's parents.

I found that Marathon Writing, which took very little time, encouraged frequent writing, independent thinking, and independent attention to task. It was a very popular part

of the program as well. The children felt very free to write without concern for spelling or handwriting constraints. The children who asked me to read their writing also enjoyed the brief comments--always positive--which I wrote back to them.

Since other, structured, writing activities were a frequent part of the program, I did not provide the oral background work prior to Marathon Writing as suggested by Shanahan. This kind of thorough pre-writing preparation took place always as a part of the other writing activities we did. Marathon Writing, then, was a free choice writing which took place immediately upon the children's entry into the classroom without comment or preparation from the teacher. Of course, a thorough discussion of the rules for Marathon Writing and a practice session took place the day before the children were expected to come into the room and independently begin writing.

Each child was given a booklet in which to do the writing. Since funds were not available for purchasing a small notebook or steno pad, simple booklets were made by folding 12 sheets of 8 1/2 x 11" unlined blue paper in half, punching two holes in the fold, and tying with a soft cord.

When a booklet was filled, it was sent home, and the child was provided with a new booklet.

The children were provided with vocabulary books in which I wrote words they needed for their other writing projects. In Marathon Writing, however, they wrote the words as well as they could on their own. Spelling and handwriting were not stressed in this portion of the program.

To provide the right model for the children, the teacher always writes as the children write. The remainder of this article is an exact copy of my Marathon Writing for three days at the beginning of the program which I later typed up with an additional ending paragraph and sent home to the parents. This letter provides the information needed for setting up a similar program in any elementary classroom.

October 22, 1986

Dear Parents:

My second grade class in reading and writing has begun their Marathon Writing today. One of the rules of this method says that the teacher must write all of the time that the children are writing. So I am writing this letter to you as the children do their writing.

Other rules for Marathon Writing are:

1. Write about anything that you want to write.
2. Write for five minutes every day. (This should really be 10-15 minutes in second grade, but this class only meets for 30 minutes three days a week, so we are writing for five minutes.)
3. If you can't think about anything else to write, repeat your last sentence. If you can't even get started, write the alphabet. Just keep writing.
4. Don't stop writing until time is up.
5. You don't have to share your writing with anyone unless you want to.

October 27, 1986

This is the second day of Marathon Writing. The children came in and went right to pick up their books. Most of them remembered right away what they were supposed to do. Seeing me doing my writing seemed to help them get settled right down for their writing. A few children forgot their pencils and had to

borrow mine. This was the only disruption we had. It is wonderful to look around the room and see 15 second graders so actively involved in writing without any word or prompting from me.

The children do not have to share their writing unless they want to. Last time I shared my writing with them just so they could see that I was actually writing, too. I write in shorthand, and they were fascinated to see those strange squiggles on the page. They just couldn't believe that it wasn't really cursive. I explained that I can read and write manuscript, and cursive, and shorthand. This really impressed them, and they wanted to know where they could learn to write shorthand, too. I hope that all will learn shorthand in high school. It has been such a valuable aid to me throughout the years, first in earning a living, and then for taking notes in college, and finally for writing papers. My first draft of any writing I do is always in shorthand because if I try to write everything out in longhand, I often loose the thought before I can finish. With shorthand I can write so much faster that this seldom happens.

October 28, 1986.

When we do Marathon Writing, we do not try to get it ready for publication. So this is not a polished piece of writing. To paraphrase Flip Wilson, "What I write is what you get."

Yesterday this class began a new writing project based on an idea I had read about where the children talk about foods they do

not like. I took that idea and introduced the project by reading the book Bread and Jam for Frances. This book tells, in a clever way, the story of a little badger who dislikes most things her mother fixes for her to eat. She wants to eat only bread and jam instead. So that is all her mother gives her at every meal for several days. Finally she is asking to have a variety of foods. After reading the story, we began a chart with two columns: Foods We Love and Foods We Hate. We talked about how the same food might show up in both columns because some people in the class might love the same food that someone else hates. After the chart was completed, we talked about a possible setting, possible characters, and the problem they would encounter. They decided that the setting was the worst food factory in the world and the problem was that no-one could get any good food to eat. They will all have this setting and problem, but the characters and the rest of the story are up to them.

November 6, 1986.

I am now writing other things in my Marathon Writing book, but I thought you might be interested in the October 22, 27, and 28 writing, so I typed it up today for you. Several of the children are now leaving their books in a special place for me to read, and I write a short note to them. Many of them have told me that they really enjoy this part of the class, and I feel that it is a very nice part of their total writing program. The other writing projects that we do provide the opportunity for group conferences, individual conferences, skills work, and occasional

"publishing" of their work. It is nice to have this component combined with the more formal instruction so that they can feel free to write what and how they wish.

Sincerely,

Linda Jones McCoy

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